

*This article was offered to Judas! just before Counterpunch asked if they could also publish it. As this would bring in a possible readership of some five million more than dear old Judas! there was no doubt that it would appear there. That is our reason for changing our normal policy of not re-printing things that had already appeared on the internet – the, now, two exceptions have had special reasons and both been acknowledged up front.*

## The Days Before Rock and Roll: Dylan's Swing Time Waltz in the Face of the Apocalypse

by Peter Stone Brown

Sometime back in the era of *Nashville Skyline*, but long before *Self Portrait* I was talking with a friend of mine who was heavily into Dylan, and had just written a paper for some course at Columbia University on "Time and Space in Bob Dylan songs." We were in a little hamlet called Shady in upstate New York, about seven minutes from Byrdcliffe, when he said, "I think Dylan reached a place where his dreams and reality are all one."

Fast forward 30 years to the early spring of 2000, Bob Dylan goes on tour with Western Swing band, Asleep at the Wheel as his opening act. In Reno he says they're the best band he ever toured with. Six months later in Indiana, Dylan does a Sons of the Pioneers song with pre-swing overtones, "Blue Bonnet Girl." The lead singer of the original recording was one Roy Rogers. When I was a kid, I once had a set of cowboy tunes on little 45-size 78s by Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers. It came in a little box with a handle. I wonder if "Blue Bonnet Girl" was on it. A few months after that I'm sitting in a delicatessen in New York with Asleep at the Wheel's leader and founder, Ray Benson, who I've known longer than I've been listening to Bob Dylan and ask him about that tour. "He only listens to old music," he tells me.

At the same time I'm engaged in heavy duty email correspondence with another friend. "He's moving back to becoming the guy who made the first album," he writes me.

In the fall Dylan suddenly recasts "Tryin' To Get To Heaven" as a jazz song and not long after does one of the songs I never expected to ever hear, "If Dogs Run Free," his first excursion into jazz. Before the year is out he records of all things, a Dean Martin song, "Return To Me," for the TV series, *The Sopranos*.

Throughout his career Bob Dylan has dropped clues about what he's going to do next among other things. Sometimes he takes his time about it. No better proof of this is the Bucky Baxter quote about we'd rehearse a song and then we wouldn't play it until a year and half later.

When "*Love and Theft*" was released one of the things that got lost in the rubble of that day was that in a sense it was his most musically realized album. There were several genres represented including a prototypical Bob Dylan song and Dylan's band at the time – possibly the best band he had during the Never Ending Tour – nailed them all. After years of putting down all his previous albums and producers, on "*Love and Theft*" you had the feeling that Dylan actually cared about the electric guitar sound. When I first heard that album one of the first things I felt was it was the most quotable Dylan album in years, and perhaps his most autobiographical.

The following year when he started playing piano again, my own feeling was he's going back to being the guy in the band in high school.

Of course the world has changed dramatically since then. I still wonder if 9/11 hadn't happened if Dylan would have done a dramatically different show that fall, where he went out and played the album, the way he did with *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved*. But instead, proving that he meant what he said when he said, "The songs are my lexicon," he reached back to Hank Williams with "Wait For The Light To Shine" to open most of the shows.

In 2005 Dylan went on tour with Merle Haggard and his band The Strangers opening. To some it was an odd choice but to those who knew Haggard's music it wasn't. Haggard, like Dylan had explored all kinds of music, doing tribute albums to Jimmie Rodgers and Western Swing legend, Bob Wills, exploring New Orleans music and various theme albums. He led one of the tightest bands in country music, capable of playing any style. Haggard is also one of the best songwriters in country music and unfortunately best known for the anti-hippie, "Okie From Muskogee," which early on gave him the reputation as a hard-core right winger. The humorous thing about all this was by the time he toured with Dylan, he was an outspoken critic of the war in Iraq and of the Bush administration.

On that tour, Dylan's band changed dramatically. Longtime guitarist and multi-instrumentalist Larry Campbell departed and at first Dylan replaced him with three people including violinist Elana Fremerman, who had opened for the Dylan/Nelson tour the previous summer. I

wondered if Dylan was nervous about Haggard's band and felt he had to bolster his own, with a twin fiddle attack to match Haggard's (Haggard plays fiddle in addition to guitar).

Elana didn't last out the tour and the sound of Dylan's band to the dismay of some of his fans began to change dramatically. This year Dylan recorded a new album and then hit the road immediately. The sound of the band was quieter with a greater use of dynamics than any Dylan band on the so-called Never Ending Tour, if not any Dylan band period. At the initial shows Dylan showed a renewed commitment to his singing.

When the cover of *Modern Times* appeared, a friend emailed me and said, "Only he would call an album *Modern Times* and put a 50-year-old car on the cover."—

*Modern Times* is a real Bob Dylan album in every sense of the word. Like its predecessor it borrows heavily from all manner of sources from ancient poets to ancient blues singers. It is dense, and dark and deep and it takes its time in an instant access world where people wear telephones and concentration is bombarded by a constant stream of so-called information, where listening to music is now a private, not a shared experience. A world where the distractions, such as the news ticker at the bottom of every news channel are as imminent a threat as any terrorist, serving only to confuse the latest war report with the latest murder horror, athletic outrage or minor kidnapping, so it's easy to miss or maybe avoid the latest governmental or corporate menace but it's okay, put a warming oven in your bathroom to keep your towels hot after your supersonic shower and some smiling bimbo will tell you it's okay and the world is just a ducky place and the omnipresent horrors are just another digital image. No wonder Dylan chose the image of some blurry film noir Chrysler vehicle careening through the tilted Manhattan streets for the cover.

So into this constantly blinking, beeping, always noisy, interactive delusion, comes Bob Dylan, wizened prophet of long ago, part country preacher, part gambler, part old time traveling medicine show hawker con man, talking in some long ago far away language so that when some almost modern phrase such as *recycling* appears, it's jarring.

Against a backdrop of lurking horror, constant confrontation, constant violence, constant almost offhand murder, constant deceptions, deviations, detours and interruptions, some natural, most man-made; some kind of way deep romance ("Without you there's no meaning in anything I do") is going on, some kind of glimmer of happiness yearning to shine bright in the face of every conceivable obstacle.

Nothing is linear in this modern world. It's all mixed up and swimming around, much like the toy eight ball I had as a kid, where a different message would surface each time you picked it up. Just about every topic Dylan's ever delved into, which is everything is represented. Some are hinted at, some lurk beneath the surface, some clearly felt and just as clearly expressed and some are fully realized. Some lines you notice right away and haunt you every time and some you notice later and you wonder why you missed them the first time.

Someone once wrote about the *Basement Tapes*, it was "music remembered." *Modern Times* in every way is music remembered. Dylan can't help but quote from the old songs. They're ingrained, a *part* of him from the simplest folk song to what he heard on the radio while growing up, the words, the melodies, the sounds, the styles, and for those who choose to moan about this, most of the answers are contained in the first song, with this not so subtle reminder: "I did all I could, I did it right there and then."

The music for the most part is subtle. It's not about hot guitar solos, it's about textures, it's about the blend of sound and though it leaps backwards from the opening Chuck Berry rocker to 40s and 50s pop and swing to blues and back with touches of country, it has a cohesive sound and feel. There are few notes if any that are out of place and the guitar solos aren't necessarily meant to sting, they're meant to play a part.

Dylan has already said (like he did with *John Wesley Harding*), "I'm not in the songs," which most likely is partially true. The "I" in "Thunder On The Mountain" isn't necessarily him, or could be him some of the time, just like in "Tangled Up In Blue," it could be a different woman in every verse. Everything that is to happen on the album is laid out on this song musically and lyrically. It's easy to pass it off as a Chuck Berry rewrite, though the acoustic guitar moves it from St. Louis (or was it Chicago) to Memphis, not to mention Dyess, Arkansas or Tupelo, Mississippi. Dylan learned long ago not to make the foolish move of tying himself down to any specific reference, but there's little doubt who and what he's talking about when he scolds, "Shame on your greed, shame on your wicked schemes."

The infatuation on "Spirit On The Water," has never been more clear and recalls every post-sixties romantic song Dylan wrote all at once ("Your sweet voice calls out from some old familiar shrine"), except he's always leaving and she's apparently cheating when he's not around, and then of course the punch line slipped in near the end,

about not being able to go back to paradise because he killed a man back there, left vague and mysterious on purpose.

The sleeplessness of this track is continued to the next a rewrite of the Muddy Waters version of "Rollin' and Tumblin'." Dylan in an obvious ballsy move makes it very obvious what he's doing and that he doesn't care. He's not doing anything different than that just about every blues singer has done, as they all had no bones about saying they wrote songs that were obviously passed down the line and this extends to A.P. Carter and W.W. Guthrie as well. Once you get deep into the song, the tone changes, and the line, "I've been conjuring up all these long dead souls from their crumblin' tombs" acknowledges the song within the song. These complaints barely surfaced when Dylan used "Good Mornin' Little Schoolgirl" to conjure up "Obviously Five Believers." Perhaps more to the point an experience remembered from the era between *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*. I'm in a huge apartment on the edge of Harlem where music from several rooms is emanating all the time, and we had just finished listening to Muddy Waters, when a friend says, "Yes that is great, but these are *my* blues, and puts *Highway 61 Revisited* on the turntable.

"When The Deal Goes Down" is the companion to "Spirit on the Water," and makes Dylan's feelings even clearer. One of the most tender vocals he ever recorded and one of the most careful, there's a sadness behind everything that is inescapable. It's in his voice and again he seems to comment on what he's singing, in the lines, "I heard a deafening noise, I felt transient joys/"I know they're not what they seem."

Dylan has always used blues songs as kind of a breather in his album, especially for shifting the change of focus, and the rewrite of "Someday Baby," (another nod to Muddy Waters) serves just that purpose, and is also a chance for Donnie Herron to show what he can do on slide guitar and fiddle, making it clear they're both slide instruments. It also serves to set up as well as off, the next song and a thematic shift in the album's lyrical direction.

"Workingman's Blues #2" has one of the most exquisite introductions to any song Dylan has ever recorded. With Dylan's piano and Donnie Herron's viola, it is simply gorgeous. There is also a nod to Merle Haggard's "Workin' Man Blues," in the title, and the electric guitar somewhere in the mix at the end of each chorus, but this song is anything but the blues though the person in the song more than has them. Like "Mississippi" on "Love and Theft," it serves as the song that *sounds* like a Bob Dylan song. The irony of this song is the person in the song isn't working and nothing for him is working, but what

Dylan does is get deep into the heart, soul and thoughts of the unemployed, how it feels to be totally beaten down by innumerable forces beyond your control. And for those who would blithely dismiss this songs as nonsense, I know more people who lost their jobs and couldn't get another one during the first part of this decade/century than at any other time in my life, and most of these people were forced to take jobs paying far less than what they were making and should be making and far below their capabilities. Welcome to the real USA.

"Beyond The Horizon" serves to give the listener another break, with a Twilight Zone rewrite of "Red Sails In The Sunset," but not really. The paradise setting is deceptive, as it is dark and dreary, is ringed with flame and fire, treacherous seas, lives that have been spared and people praying for souls.

"Nettie Moore," perhaps the high point of the album is one of the most astounding tracks Dylan has recorded in the past two decades. With a singularly insistent, waiting, pacing heartbeat drumbeat, the songs moves through centuries and subjects, back and forth through time, through romance, through dreams, in a world gone black, where praying in the light, the singer wishes for darkness. At the same time the mystical rambling joker of "*Love and Theft*" briefly appears, but as with much of the rest of this album, the only force that diminishes grief is love.

The grief starts swinging in the face of disaster on "When The Levee Breaks," with a repeating guitar riff that is ominous and deliberate. Like "Thunder On The Mountain," it's easy at first to brush off as another blues song, and again the lyrics wander from romance to impending doom, but as each verse progresses, the lyrics get darker, sometimes in the whole verse, sometimes in the answer line. One of the few songs with guitar solos, the guitars are hot, but the sound is muted so they're just another part of the song.

The country gospel hymn, "Wayfaring Stranger," performed by all kinds of singers from Burl Ives to Bill Monroe to Johnny Cash, as well as being the basis for one of John Lee Hooker's scariest tunes, "Don't Turn Me From Your Door," which in turn was the inspiration for Van Morrison's "Astral Weeks," sets the tone and the canvas for "Ain't Talkin'," a major work. Quoting "Wild Mountain Thyme," Dylan (or is it a character) wanders into the mystic garden, where he is immediately attacked and finds out the mystic garden isn't a garden at all. The character in the song, using an endless list of ancient songs, catalogs a list of unspeakable horrors, but keeps walking, keeps on anyway, until perhaps back at the beginning of the song, he asks a woman (who

doesn't answer) where the gardener's gone, and realizes he is at the end of the world.

Using music rather words to speak, as the song ends, the same way it started, it suddenly resolves on a celestial major chord perhaps signaling the shimmering and shining light behind the horizon.